

## Achieving an AIDS Free Bahamas

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He said he loved me and we would spend the rest of our lives together. He said that taking my virginity is a sign that I belong to him and he to me. He said that sex to him, is equivalent to love, trust and a lasting relationship, but he did not say that he was seeing other males and females. He did not say that he was an AIDS victim who wanted to infect others because it was done to him. He did not have to say. At first the symptoms were subtle, a nagging cough that would not go away, a rash and itching - the symptoms persisted and I checked, only to find out I had AIDS and was pregnant. What am I to do? Where am I to go? Who will be willing to take care of me and my unborn child? What could I have done differently? Didn't I see the signs? Oh God! Why me? Why me? This, friends, is the scenario and the cry of many young girls who have been infected with the AIDS virus, but this could have, and SHOULD have been avoided.

Madam Chair Person, honorable judges, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls and my fellow orators good morning. "Achieving an AIDS Free Bahamas", what a timely topic.

As defined in the Webster's Dictionary, the word Achieve is to pursue, accomplish, obtain or succeed in any given venture. AIDS stands for the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and is caused by the HIV Virus. I stand with confidence to give suggestions on how we can eradicate this

deadly disease that breaks down the immune system and causes death. Thus our mission is to achieve an AIDS Free Bahamas.

If you have come to be entertained, you are in the wrong place. If you want sugar coated facts, you definitely don't belong here, but let me oblige you. I ask that you attune your ears to be enlightened on some startling facts.

Online records indicate that:

- Over 2,078 persons in The Bahamas are currently living with AIDS
- Over 5,387 persons are infected with the HIV virus, of which 3,626 are males and 2,477 are females
- Records also reveal that over 146 babies infected with the AIDS virus are born each year
- Approximately 3% of our population is infected
- 25% of the infections are in the Creole speaking community and
- 84% of HIV infections are in New Providence.

Ladies, are you aware that rates of infections are highest among young girls? Epidemiological data shows that half of the persons living with HIV are women. Sad isn't it, but what are we to do? We cannot allow ourselves to be manipulated by self-centered, selfish men. Unequal sexual relationships, means it's harder for us women to negotiate condom use. We need to choose our partners carefully. Ladies, let's not be silly - insist that they cover up their willy.

Being proactive is the key. To achieve our goal, we need to educate the citizens of The Bahamas, especially our teens. Talking to our teens about the dangers of unprotected sex is vital.

Young people, we cannot continue to engage in risk taking behavior. Let's practice abstinence. Do not take chances, remember, people with HIV look and seem healthy too.

One of the nurses at Princess Margaret Hospital was devastated when she reported that teens were rated among the highest victims of this deadly virus. With tears in her eyes she said and I quote, "This does not have to be, but our people lack knowledge." The bible says, "My people perish because of a lack of knowledge." Bahamians, we do not want to perish, do we?

How often have you heard that "Knowledge is Power?" Are you ready to make an educated decision? A decision that can save your life. A decision that says "AIDS PREVENTION IS MY INTENTION"

If so, it is imperative that we put the necessary programs in place. We must get everyone involved so that we can see one big picture, which is the survival of our nation. Churches, schools, civic groups, organizations, business places and communities need to join together. They need to come together and speak with one voice so that the objective could be heard and the mission could be achieved.

Because of organizations like the AIDS Foundation and programs like PEPFAR, HIV/AIDS is being given the attention it so desperately needs.

Grammy always said, "Prevention is better than cure." So, let's be proactive. Let's avoid sharing needles. I urge the Ministry of Health to make it mandatory for pregnant women to be tested. I further wish to encourage the Ministry of National Security to give serious thought to distributing condoms in prison. Unfortunately, there is too much stigma to this disease. Society needs to be educated to stop treating HIV/AIDS victims as if they are "outcasts." Contrary to popular belief, AIDS is NOT a "gay" disease. Let's stop pointing fingers and give a hand.

Achieving an AIDS free Bahamas begins with you and me. Be bold and do your part. Mahatma Ghandi urged people, "Be the change you want people to see." Though it may seem as an impossible task, we can achieve an AIDS free Bahamas.

Now go back and imagine with me, imagine the outcome if I had this information prior to my misfortune, if only I had been educated about this deadly disease. If only programs had been in place to prevent me from being a pregnant AIDS victim, then my story would have been different.

Yes there would have been tears, but they would have been tears of joy. Joy because I waited, waited for Mr. Right who actually loves and respects me, marries me and starts a family with me.

If we help to educate one person at a time then this could mean one less person infected. Remember, AIDS prevention should be every one's intention. AIDS prevention is the key to an AIDS Free Bahamas.

Now, take a hand, yes take some one's hand. Together let's stand in solidarity for an AIDS free Bahama Land. Here me Bahamas, 'Dis ting go with sense.'

